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THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

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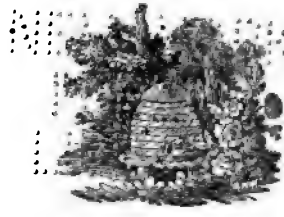
THE
SCHOOL OF LIFE

BY

Henry van Dyke



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THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

MANY fine things have been said in Commencement Addresses about "Culture and Progress," "The Higher Learning," "American Scholarship," "The University Spirit," "The Woman's College," and other subjects bearing on the relation of education to life. But the most important thing, which needs not only to be said, but also to be understood, is that life itself is the great school.

This whole framework of things visible and invisible wherein we mysteriously find ourselves perceiving, reasoning, reflecting, desiring, choosing and acting, is designed and fitted, so far at least as it concerns us and re-

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veals itself to us, to be a place of training and enlightenment for the human race through the unfolding and development of human persons such as you and me. For no other purpose are these wondrous potencies of perception and emotion, thought and will, housed within walls of flesh and shut in by doors of sense, but that we may learn to set them free and lead them out. For no other purpose are we beset with attractions and repulsions, obstacles and allurements, helps and hardships, tasks, duties, pleasures, persons, books, machines, plants, animals, houses, forests, storm and sunshine, water fresh and salt, fire wild and tame, a various earth, a mutable heaven, and an intricate humanity, but that we may be instructed in the nature of things and people, and rise by knowledge and sympathy,

through gradual and secret promotions, into a fuller and finer life.

Facts are teachers. Experiences are lessons. Friends are guides. Work is a master. Love is an interpreter. Teaching itself is a method of learning. Joy carries a divining rod and discovers fountains. Sorrow is an astronomer and shows us the stars. What I have lived I really know, and what I really know I partly own; and so begirt with what I know and what I own, I move through my curriculum, elective and required, gaining nothing but what I learn, at once instructed and examined by every duty and every pleasure.

It is a mistake to say, "To-day education ends, to-morrow life begins." The process is continuous: the idea into the thought, the thought into the action, the action into the character. When

the mulberry seed falls into the ground and germinates, it begins to be transformed into silk.

This view of life as a process of education was held by the Greeks and the Hebrews,—the two races in whose deep hearts the stream of modern progress takes its rise, the two great races whose energy of spirit and strength of self-restraint have kept the world from sinking into the dream-lit torpor of the mystic East, or whirling into the blind, restless activity of the barbarian West.

What is it but the idea of the school of life that sings through the words of the Hebrew psalmist? "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go. I will guide thee with mine eye. Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle lest they come

near unto thee." This warning against the mulish attitude which turns life into a process of punishment, this praise of the eye-method which is the triumph of teaching, — these are the notes of a wonderful and world-wide school.

It is the same view of life that shines through Plato's noble words: "This then must be our notion of the just man, that even when he is in poverty or sickness, or any other seeming misfortune, all things will in the end work together for good to him in life and death; for the gods have a care of any one whose desire is to become just, and to be like God, as far as man can attain His likeness by the pursuit of virtue."

Not always, indeed, did the Greek use so strong an ethical emphasis. For him the dominant idea was the unfolding

of reason, the clarifying of the powers of thought and imagination. His ideal man was one who saw things as they are, and understood their nature, and felt beauty, and followed truth.

It was the Hebrew who laid the heaviest stress upon the conception of righteousness. The foundations of his school were the tablets on which the divine laws, "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not," were inscribed. The ideal of his education was the power to distinguish between good and evil, and the will to choose the good, and the strength to stand by it. Life, to his apprehension, fulfilled its purpose in the development of a man who walked uprightly and kept the commandments.

Thus these two master-races of antiquity, alike in their apprehension of existence from the standpoint of the

soul, worked out their thought of vital education, along the lines of different temperaments, to noble results. Æschylus and Ezekiel lived in the same century.

Reason and Righteousness: what more can the process of life do to justify itself, than to unfold these two splendid flowers on the tree of our humanity? What third idea is there that the third great race, the Anglo-Saxon, may conceive, and cherish, and bring to blossom and fruition?

There is only one,—the idea of Service. Too much the sweet reasonableness of the Greek ideal tended to foster an intellectual isolation; too much the strenuous righteousness of the Hebrew ideal gave shelter to the microbe of Pharisaism. It was left for the Anglo-Saxon race, quickened by the new

word and the new life of a Divine Teacher, to claim for the seed an equal glory with the flower and the fruit; to perceive that righteousness is not reasonable, and reason is not righteous, unless they are both communicable and serviceable; to say that the highest result of our human experience is to bring forth better men and women, able and willing to give of that which makes them better to the world in which they live. This is the ultimate word concerning the school of life. I catch its inspiring note in the question of that very noble gentleman Sir Philip Sidney, who said, "To what purpose should our thoughts be directed to various kinds of knowledge, unless room be afforded for putting it into practice, so that public advantage may be the result?" These then are what the edu-

cation of life is to bring out,—Reason, Righteousness, and Service.

But if life itself be the school, what becomes of our colleges and universities? They are, or they ought to be, simply preparatory institutions to fit us to go on with our education. Not what do they teach, but how do they prepare us to learn—that is the question. I measure a college not by the height of its towers, nor by the length of its examination papers, nor by the pride of its professors, but chiefly by the docility of its graduates. I do not ask, Where did you leave off? but, Are you ready to go on? Graduation is not a stepping out; it is either a stepping up,—*gradu ad gradum*,—a promotion to a higher class, or a dropping to a lower one. The cause for which a student is dropped may be invincible ignorance, incurable

frivolity, or obstructive and constrictive learning.

"One of the benefits of a college education," says Emerson, "is to show a boy its little avail." Hamilton and Jefferson and Madison and Adams and Webster were college men. But Franklin, Washington, Marshall, Clay and Lincoln were not.

A college education is good for those who can digest it. The academic atmosphere has its dangers, of which the greatest are a certain illusion of infallibility, a certain fever of intellectual jealousy, and a certain dry idolatry of schedules and programmes. But these infirmities hardly touch the mass of students, busy as they are nowadays with their athletics, their societies, their youthful pleasures. The few who are affected more seriously are usually

cured by contact with the larger world. Most of the chronic cases occur among those who really never leave the preparatory institution, but pass from the class to the instructor's seat, and from that to the professorial chair, and so along the spiral, bounded ever by the same curve and steadily narrowing inward.

Specialists we must have; and to-day we are told that a successful specialist must give his whole life to the study of the viscosity of electricity, or the value of the participial infinitive, or some such pin-point of concentration. For this a secluded and cloistered life may be necessary. But let us have room also in our colleges for teachers who have been out in the world, and touched life on different sides, and taken part in various labours, and been buffeted,

and learned how other men live, and what troubles them, and what they need. Great is the specialist, and precious; but I think we still have a use for masters of the old type, who knew many things, and were broadened by experience, and had the power of vital inspiration, and could start their pupils on and up through the struggles and triumphs of a lifelong education.

There is much discussion nowadays of the subjects which may be, or must be, taught in a college. A part, at least, of the controversy is futile. For the main problem is not one of subjects, but of aim and method. "Liberal studies," says Professor S. H. Butcher, one of the finest living teachers of Greek, "pursued in an illiberal spirit, fall below the mechanical arts in dignity and worth." There are two ways of teaching

any subject: one opens the mind, the other closes it.

The mastery of the way to do things is the accomplishment that counts for future work. I like the teacher who shows me not merely where he stands, but how he got there, and who encourages and equips me to find my own path through the maze of books and the tangled thickets of human opinion.

Let us keep our colleges and universities true to their function, which is preparatory and not final. Let us not ask of them a yearly output of "finished scholars." The very phrase has a mortuary sound, like an epitaph. He who can learn no more has not really learned anything. What we want is not finished scholars, but well-equipped learners; minds that can give and take;

intellects not cast in a mould, but masters of a method; people who are ready to go forward wisely towards a larger wisdom.

The chief benefit that a good student may get in a good college is not a definite amount of Greek and Latin, Mathematics and Chemistry, Botany and Zoölogy, History and Logic, though this in itself is good. But far better is the power to apprehend and distinguish, to weigh evidence and interpret facts, to think clearly, to infer carefully, to imagine vividly. Best of all is a sense of the unity of knowledge, a reverence for the naked truth, a perception of the variety of beauty, a feeling of the significance of literature, and a wider sympathy with the upward-striving, dimly-groping, perplexed and dauntless life of man.

I will not ask whether such a result of college training has any commercial value, whether it enables one to command a larger wage in the market-place, whether it opens the door to wealth, or fame, or social distinction; nor even whether it increases the chance of winning a place in the red book of *Who's Who*. These questions are treasonable to the very idea of education, which aims not at a marketable product, but at a vital development. The one thing certain and important is that those who are wisely and liberally disciplined and enlightened in any college enter the school of life with an advantage. They are "well prepared," as we say. They are fitted to go on with their education in reason and righteousness and service, under the Great Master.

I do not hold with the modern epigram that "the true university is a library." Through the vast wilderness of books flows the slender stream of literature, and often there is need of guidance to find and follow it. Only a genius or an angel can safely be turned loose in a library to wander at will. Nothing is more offensive than the complacent illusion of omniscience begotten in an ignorant person by the haphazard reading of a few volumes of philosophy or science.

There is a certain kind of reading that is little better than an idle habit, a substitute for thought. Of many books it may be said that they are nothing but the echoes of echoing echoes. If a good book be as Milton said, "the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured," still the sacred relic, as

in the vial of St. Januarius at Naples, remains solid and immovable. It needs a kind of miracle to make it liquefy and flow,—the miracle of interpretation and inspiration,—wrought most often by the living voice of a wise master, and communicating to the young heart the wonderful secret that some books are alive. Never shall I forget the miracle wrought for me by the reading of Milton's *Comus* by my father in his book-lined study on Brooklyn Heights, and of Cicero's *Letters* by Professor Packard in the Latin class at old Princeton.

The Greeks learned the alphabet from the Phœnicians. But the Phœnicians used it for contracts, deeds, bills of lading, and accounts; the Greeks for poetry and philosophy. Contracts and accounts, of all kinds, are for filing. Literature is of one kind only, the inter-

pretation of life and nature through the imagination in clear and personal words of power and charm. And this is for reading.

To get the good of the library in the school of life you must bring into it something better than a mere bookish taste. You must bring the power to read, between the lines, behind the words, beyond the horizon of the printed page. Philip's question to the chamberlain of Ethiopia was crucial: "Understandest thou what thou readest?" I want books not to pass the time, but to fill it with beautiful thoughts and images, to enlarge my world, to give me new friends in the spirit, to purify my ideals and make them clear, to show me the local colour of unknown regions and the bright stars of universal truth.

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Time is wasted if we read too much looking-glass fiction, books about our own class and place and period, stories of American college-life, society novels, tales in which our own conversation is repeated and our own prejudices are embodied,—Kodak prints, Gramophone cylinders! I prefer the real voice, the visible face, things which I can see and hear for myself without waiting for Miss Arabella Tompkins' report of them. When I read, I wish to go abroad, to hear new messages, to meet new people, to get a fresh point of view, to revisit other ages, to listen to the oracles of Delphi and drink deep of the springs of Pieria. The only writer who can tell me anything of real value about my familiar environment is the genius who shows me that after all it is not familiar, but strange, wonderful,

crowded with secrets unguessed and possibilities unrealized.

The two things best worth reading about in poetry and fiction are the symbols of Nature and the passions of the human heart. I want also an essayist who will clarify life by gentle illumination and lambent humour; a philosopher who will help me to see the reason of things apparently unreasonable; a historian who will show me how peoples have risen and fallen; and a biographer who will let me touch the hand of the great and the good. This is the magic of literature. This is how real books help to educate us in the school of life.

There is no less virtue, but rather more, in events, tasks, duties, obligations, than there is in books. Work itself has a singular power to unfold and

develop our nature. The difference is not between working people and thinking people; but between people who work without thinking and people who think while they work.

What is it that you have to do? To weave cloth, to grow fruit, to sell bread, to make a fire, to prepare food, to nurse the sick, to keep house? It matters not. Your task brings you the first lesson of reason,—that you must deal with things as they are, not as you imagine or desire them to be. Wet wood will not burn. Fruit trees must have sunshine. Heavy bread will not sell. Sick people have whims. Empty cupboards yield no dinners. The house will not keep itself. Platitudes, no doubt; but worth more for education than many a metaphysical theory or romantic dream. For when we face

these things and realize their meaning, they lead us out of the folly of trying to live in such a world as we would like it to be, and make us live in the world which is.

The mystic visions of the dreamy Orient are a splendid pageant. But for guidance I follow Socrates, whose gods were too noble to deceive or masquerade, whose world was a substantial embodiment of divine ideas, and whose men and women were not playthings of Fate or Chance, but living souls, working, struggling, fighting their way to victory.

I do not wish to stay with the nurse and hear fairy-tales. I prefer to enter the school of life. In the presence of the mysteries of pain and suffering, under the pressure of disaster or disease, I turn not for counsel to some Scythian

soothsayer with her dark incantations, and her vague assurances that the evil will vanish if I only close my eyes, but to a calm, wise teacher like Hippocrates, who says, "As for me I think that these maladies are divine, like all others, but that none is more divine or more human than another. Each has its natural principle, and none exists without its natural cause."

This is intellectual fortitude. And fortitude is the sentinel and guardian virtue; without it all other virtues are in peril. Daring is inborn, and often born blind. But fortitude is implanted, nurtured, unfolded in the school of life. I praise the marvellous courage of the human heart, enduring evils, facing perplexities, overcoming obstacles, rising after a hundred falls, building up what gravity pulls down, toiling at

tasks never finished, relighting extinguished fires, and hoping all things. I find fault with Byron's line,—"*fair* women and *brave* men,"—for women are not less brave than men, but often more brave, though in a different way. Life itself takes them in hand, these delicate and gracious creatures; and if they are worthy and willing, true scholars of experience, educates them in a heroism of the heart which suffers all the more splendidly because it is sensitive, and conquers fear all the more gloriously because it is timorous.

The obstinacy of the materials with which we have to deal, in all kinds of human work, has an educational value. Some one has called it "the total depravity of inanimate things." The phrase would be fit if depravity could be conceived of as beneficent. No doubt

a world in which matter never got out of place and became dirt, in which iron had no flaws and wood no cracks, in which gardens had no weeds and food grew ready cooked, in which clothes never wore out and washing was as easy as the advertisements describe it, in which the right word was not hard to find, and rules had no exceptions, and things never went wrong, would be a much easier place to live in. But for purposes of training and development it would be worth nothing at all. It is the resistance that puts us on our mettle: it is the conquest of the reluctant stuff that educates the worker. I wish you enough difficulties to keep you well and make you strong and skilful!

No one can get the full benefit of the school of life who does not welcome the silent and deep instruction of Nature.

This earth on which we live, these heavens above us, these dumb companions of our work and play, this wondrous living furniture and blossoming drapery of our school-room — all have their lessons to impart. But they will not teach swiftly and suddenly; they will not let us master their meaning in a single course, or sum it all up in a single treatise. Slowly, gradually, with infinite reserves, with delicate confidences, as if they would prolong their instruction that we may not forsake their companionship, they yield up their significance to the student who loves them.

The scientific study of Nature is often commended on merely practical grounds. I would honour and praise it for higher reasons,—for its power to train the senses in the habit of veracious observation; for its corrective in-

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fluence upon the audacity of a logic which would attempt to evolve the camel from the inner consciousness of a philosopher; for its steadying, quieting effect upon the mind. Poets have indulged too often in supercilious sneers at the man of science, the natural philosopher,—

> "*a fingering slave,*
> *One that would peep and botanize*
> *Upon his mother's grave.*"

The contempt is ill founded; the sneer is indiscriminate. It is as if one should speak of the poet as—

> *A man of trifling breath,*
> *One that would flute and sonneteer*
> *About his sweetheart's death.*

Is there any more danger of narrowing the mind by the patient scrutiny of plants and birds, than by the investigation of ancient documents and an-

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nals, or the study of tropes, metaphors and metres? Is it only among men of science that we find pettiness, and irascibility, and domineering omniscience, or do they sometimes occur among historians and poets? It seems to me that there are no more serene and admirable intelligences than those which are often found among the true naturalists. How fine and enviable is their lifelong pursuit of their chosen subject. What mind could be happier in its kingdom than that of an Agassiz or a Guyot? What life more beautiful and satisfying than that of a Linnæus or an Audubon?

But for most of us these advanced courses in natural science are impossible. What we must content ourselves with is not really worthy to be called nature-study; it is simply nature-kindergarten. We learn a little about the

movements of the stars and clouds; a few names of trees and flowers and birds; some of the many secrets of their life and growth; just the words of one syllable, that is all. And then if we are wise and teachable, we walk with Nature, and let her breathe into our hearts those lessons of humility, and patience, and confidence, and good cheer, and tranquil resignation, and temperate joy, which are her "moral lore,"—lessons which lead her scholars onward through a merry youth, and a strong maturity, and a serene old age, and prepare them by the pure companionship of this world for the enjoyment of a better.

The social environment, the human contact in all its forms, plays a large part in the school of life. "The city instructs men," said Simonides.

Conversation is an exchange of ideas:

this is what distinguishes it from gossip, and chatter. The organization of work, the division of labour, implies and should secure a mutual education of the workers. Some day, when this is better understood, the capitalist will be enlightened and the labour-union civilized.

Even the vexed problem of domestic service is capable of yielding educational results to those who are busy with it. The mistress may learn something of the nature of fair dealing, the responsibilities of command, the essential difference between a carpet-sweeping machine and the girl who pushes it. The servant may learn something of the dignity of doing any kind of work well, the virtue of self-respecting obedience, and the sweet reasonableness of performing the task that is paid for.

I do not think much of the analogy between human society and the beehive or the ant-hill, which certain writers are now elaborating in subtle symbolist fashion. It passes over and ignores the vital problem which is ever pressing upon us humans,—the problem of reconciling personal claims with the claims of the race. Among the bees and the ants, so far as we can see, the community is all, the individual is nothing. There are no personal aspirations to suppress; no conscious conflicts of duty and desire; no dreams of a better kind of hive, a new and perfected formicary. It is only to repeat themselves, to keep the machine going, to reproduce the same hive, the same ant-hill, that these perfect communisms blindly strive. But human society is less perfect and therefore more

promising. The highest achievements of humanity come from something which, so far as we know, bees and ants do not possess: the sense of imperfection, the desire of advance.

Ideals must be personal before they can become communal. It was not until the rights of the individual were perceived and recognized, including the right to the pursuit of happiness, that the vision of a free and noble state, capable of progress, dawned upon mankind.

Life teaches all but the obstinate and mean how to find a place in such a state, and grow therein. A true love of others is twinned with a right love of self; that is, a love for the better part, the finer, nobler self, the man that is

"to arise in me,
That the man that I am may cease to be."

Individualism is a fatal poison. But individuality is the salt of common life. You may have to live in a crowd, but you do not have to live like it, nor subsist on its food. You may have your own orchard. You may drink at a hidden spring. Be yourself if you would serve others.

Learn also how to appraise criticism, to value enmity, to get the good of being blamed and evil spoken of. A soft social life is not likely to be very noble. You can hardly tell whether your faiths and feelings are real until they are attacked.

But take care that you defend them with an open mind and by right reason. You are entitled to a point of view, but not to announce it as the centre of the universe. Prejudice, more than anything else, robs life of its educational

value. I knew a man who maintained that the chief obstacle to the triumph of Christianity was the practice of infant baptism. I heard a woman say that no one who ate with his knife could be a gentleman. Hopeless scholars these!

What we call society is very narrow. But life is very broad. It includes "the whole world of God's cheerful, fallible men and women." It is not only the famous people and the well-dressed people who are worth meeting. It is every one who has something to communicate. The scholar has something to say to me, if he be still alive. But I would hear also the traveller, the manufacturer, the soldier, the good workman, the forester, the village school-teacher, the nurse, the quiet observer, the unspoiled child, the skilful housewife. I knew an old German woman, living in

a city tenement, who said, "My heart is a little garden, and God is planting flowers there."

"*Il faut cultiver son jardin*,"—yes, but not only that. One should learn also to enjoy the neighbour's garden, however small; the roses straggling over the fence, the scent of lilacs drifting across the road.

There is a great complaint nowadays about the complication of life, especially in its social and material aspects. It is bewildering, confusing, over-straining. It destroys the temper of tranquillity necessary to education. The simple life is recommended, and rightly, as a refuge from this trouble.

But perhaps we need to understand a little more clearly what simplicity is. It does not consist merely in low ceilings, loose garments, and the absence

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of *bric-à-brac.* Life may be conventional and artificial in a log cabin. Philistines have their prejudices, and the etiquette of the cotton-mill may be as absurd and burdensome as that of the manor-house. A little country town, with its inflexible social traditions, its petty sayings and jealousies, its obstinate mistrust of all that is strange and its crude gossip about all that it cannot comprehend, with its sensitive self-complacency, and its subtle convolutions of parish politics, and its rivalries on a half inch scale, may be as complicated and as hard to live in as great Babylon itself.

Simplicity, in truth, is less dependent upon external things than we imagine. It can live in broadcloth or homespun; it can eat white bread or black. It is not outward, but inward. A certain open-

ness of mind to learn the daily lessons of the school of life; a certain willingness of heart to give and to receive that extra service, that gift beyond the strict measure of debt which makes friendship possible; a certain clearness of spirit to perceive the best in things and people, to love it without fear and to cleave to it without mistrust; a peaceable sureness of affection and taste; a gentle straightforwardness of action; a kind sincerity of speech,—these are the marks of the simple life, which cometh not with observation, for it is within you. I have seen it in a hut. I have seen it in a palace. And wherever it is found it is the best prize of the school of life, the badge of a scholar well-beloved of the Master.

THE END

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